

## SECTION III: METHODOLOGY

### 5 Flow of Inquiry

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As suggested in the introduction, my inquiry has shifted from an initially exclusive focus upon business-NGO relationships to include attention towards the relational practices between knower and known in inquiry for sustainability. The axioms, underlying orientation and practices of participatory action research associated with a participatory worldview have provided me with a range of experiences, methodologies and tools to draw upon in conducting my inquiry. There are a range of background, motifs and practices that have, together, informed the ways in which I have come to theorise, practice, reflect upon and act within my research. It is an eclectic and shifting pattern and, as Reason and Bradbury suggest, action research “is truly a living movement for which no one person or community can claim ownership” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Instead of trying to place myself with certainty in a static position, in this chapter I provide you with an idea of my personal movement in a moving field in order to set out what I did in my research and relate my practice as an inquirer. Whilst my inquiry has been informed by the kind of theoretical input discussed in chapter 4, it has also been an intense personal journey that has formed part of a transition in my relating to the world. As with any journey it seems easy to observe it afterwards from the perspective of the crow. For me, the change and knowing seems to have been made possible by the very twisted, uncertain and stumbling hop-skip-and-jump that has felt like action research. So while I have spent a great amount of time in reflection and writing, critically evaluating my own practice and reprimanding myself for not taking the advice of the imaginary crow by proceeding directly to “here”, I have now come to the point where I can but celebrate my experience (admittedly, this is sometimes a slightly sober and reflective reminiscing and at others a wild and crazy fiesta.)

...And for the crow in all of us I can offer a small amount of straight-to-the-point foresight: from the weighty action research “map” (I should perhaps add “drawing, video, poem, musical and dance” to reflect the multi-media aspirations of the paradigm) I have picked up, in particular, the learning history methodology and the notion of self-reflective practice to inform

my inquiry, the practices of which I shall attempt to describe below. In a more general way my emergent understanding has been informed by

- pedagogical ideals, emanating from Freirian conscientização and the participatory research work in development practice in Southern countries;
- a call for knowing to flow from lived and grounded experience that can be translated into new ways of informed action, change and transformation;
- a desire to have research play for multiple audiences - 1<sup>st</sup> person as personal inquiry and development, 2<sup>nd</sup> person as research *with* people and 3<sup>rd</sup> person working within wider circles in society in a creative and dilemma-full way;
- an extended range of epistemologies that draw from feminist and non-Western (silenced) backgrounds and that seek to tap into and validate a range of ways of knowing as acceptable and necessary for constituting theory and practice;
- a mutually influencing relating-through-doing of research, practice and education, with an injunction to “live life as inquiry” that flows from this and
- an ecological/organic metaphor that tries to reflect systemic and deep interconnection, is not afraid of non-visible and non-local effects, is aware of local moment-to-moment control, is not in the form of an “either/or” state but in continual change and emergence and that embraces spiritual, universe and earth stories as integral to our knowing.

## 5.1 Early footsteps

In preparing for my transfer from MPhil to PhD status between January 1999 and May 1999 I was considering the methodology that I would use in my inquiry at the same time as beginning to make contact with potential participants in my inquiry. Until that time I had been thinking that my research would be largely centred “out there”. Drawing upon some work during my undergraduate course on business networks as well as moderate experience of NGOs and sustainability during work placement, I had come to frame the research as an attempt to look at how businesses were being influenced by external parties such as NGOs in the context of sustainability.

During this time I met with individuals from organisations involved or interested in the relationships between NGOs and the private sector with a view to developing the central questions in my research. I had discussions with individuals from Amnesty International, Oxfam, CAFOD, Save the Children UK, the New Academy of Business and various

organisation/business consultants. From these conversations it seemed that such relationships created considerable uncertainty, both within the organisations and the individuals working within. This seemed to jar with much of the external presentation of such efforts which suggested that it was a simple matter of NGOs helping businesses to change. It seemed that there were challenges in the forging of the relationship between business and NGO and that needed to be investigated from within; an approach that could, as I said at the time, find out what was “actually” going on in these relationships - how the individuals involved were experiencing the relationships and what the implications were within collaborating organisations and significantly, how the interactions at the micro level were related to the wider issue of change and sustainability; put simply I felt I wanted to know “what happens when businesses and NGOs talk to each other” (Personal notes, 12 January 1999; Bath). This seemed to require an in-depth form of inquiry with a single case. Appendix A shows a map of these ideas that I developed early on in the process.

Whilst I made these first steps in the “field”, I was drawn to ideas emanating from the action research tradition that appealed to multiple audiences in its practice “for me”, “for us” and “for them” (Reason & Marshall, 1987) and first, second and third person research/practice (Torbert, ) as well as the constructivist axioms as laid out for example by Lincoln and Guba (1985). At this stage, since I did not have direct experience of these relationships, I felt comfortable with an approach that could allow the focus to appear with greater clarity once in the particular setting; thus, the cyclical flow of a constructivist approach was initially appealing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The notion of working *with* participants in the research setting such that the inquiry would be of use to them in their everyday action appeared to be an attractive feature of these approaches.

During this time I was in the process of contacting businesses and NGOs that had experienced working with organisations from the other sector to ascertain whether they would be interested in reflecting upon and learning from these relationships. I made these approaches on a primarily pragmatic basis. I did not place any firm criteria upon the type of NGO, business or relationship between the parties except that the interaction was collaborative and change oriented; from the organisations I contacted the forms of relating ranged from one-off marketing type relationships to more strategic collaborations and concerned environment and development initiatives. Since it was the relationship, the processes of interaction within and individual reflection upon these that I was hoping to look into, I considered it more important to have both organisations “on-board”. I firstly contacted organisations with whom I had already had some prior communication, then I followed up “referrals” and eventually made

“cold calls”. In instances where there was interest and a conversation was established I was asked what I would be doing, what questions I would be asking, what I wanted to find out etc. I explained that the exact direction of the research would be very much dependent upon the participants from both organisations in the setting. I also added that in broad brushstrokes I wished to look at how the organisations and individuals within were affected by the process of interaction and to relate this to the wider context of change and sustainability. I sought to balance the need to provide a sufficiently focused proposal to potential research participants in order to “sell the research as something worthwhile ” (Personal notes, 3 March 1999; Bath), whilst holding open the possibility for the design to surface in the setting.

The previous year (July 1998) I had attended a seminar by Hilary Bradbury in which she discussed the learning history she had conducted with the Natural Step as part of her PhD. I was attracted to the method by the notion of collaboratively making sense of collaborative action and its inclusive and “holographic” and resonant image. Although the learning history had only been applied within the context of a single organisation and almost exclusively to businesses, the reflective action-orientation suggested an in-depth approach to working across two organisations who had a desire to learn from a relationship between them. As I sought to establish contact with organisations, it seemed that the method could add some specificity and tangibility to the research proposal that most individuals were asking for, whilst also maintaining the possibilities for change and reflective orientation of the action research paradigm.

In April 1999 the possibility of conducting a learning history with Shell and Living Earth first arose. I had previously had some contact with INTRAC (International NGO Training and Research Centre) - an NGO support organisation based in Oxford; they were conducting a two-year global research project into the relationships between the private sector and NGOs and were looking for external researchers to feed into their study. In January 1999 I had made a general proposal to INTRAC to conduct a learning history with appropriately interested organisations, although I did not have any confirmed site for such an inquiry. Although this did not work out initially, in late March the possibility of working with Living Earth and Shell International developed through INTRAC’s network of contacts. Simon Heap at INTRAC suggested that the organisations were interested in the opportunity to look into and reflect upon their relationship in both the UK and Nigeria and so I developed a proposal (see appendix E) to conduct a learning history with Living Earth and Shell.

As described in chapter 4 the learning history is an action-oriented research approach to organisation development and learning that allows members of an organisation to reflect collectively upon a particular experience and learn from this to enable improved action. Kleiner and Roth (1997) set out a six-stage process for conducting a learning history:

- “initial planning” determines the scope and range of the history with participants;
- “reflective interviews” allow for in-depth focused conversations about the relationship;
- “distillation” of the data from the interviews and observations into themes through the development of grounded theory;
- “writing up” where participants and historians together build an organised account of the material around the developed themes. The format of the learning history document - a two column presentation of participants’ thinking alongside reflexive questions - is designed to allow an open ended and generative reading;
- “validation” of data, quotes and other material to be presented in the history by participants;
- “dissemination” through reflective workshops involving participants from original group as well as others outside.

The proposal I made to Living Earth and Shell encompassed these elements in the context of the planned work across organisational, sector and international boundaries.

## **5.2 Contact with participants and reflective interviews**

The initial response in May from both organisations was favourable. Importantly, it seemed to allow a more than sufficient window of opportunity to conduct the inquiry. INTRAC had planned to publish output from the research at the end of the year and I would be committed to contribute to this. The timeline seemed to allow sufficient opportunity first, to complete the learning history and then, to write the case-study. Although, I did not have direct contact with either organisation I was told by INTRAC that they were very much interested in pursuing the learning history and Shell would now need to finalise the internal agreement so that we could proceed.

In late August, four months after the initial proposal, Shell told INTRAC that they had now established the internal consensus to go ahead with the research and that we could meet to discuss the learning history. A meeting involving myself, Simon Heap from INTRAC, Roger

Hammond from Living Earth UK and Michael Megarry from Shell International was set up for the end of August. During the meeting I made a presentation of my proposed approach and asked whether there was interest for conducting this kind of open-ended inquiry. We discussed the need for spending considerable amount of time to determine focus and then for the reflective interviews. We developed a provisional list of people in the UK and Nigeria who were involved in the relationship and would be important for the inquiry<sup>1</sup>.

Following the meeting I considered that Michael and Roger - the “sponsors” of the research within Shell International and Living Earth felt comfortable with the learning history proposal, including the plan for workshops and overall emergent nature. INTRAC required their case study to be written by December 1999 and I was aware that there may be some tensions in producing both a case study for public dissemination and the learning history; an important aspect of the learning history was to create a space for internal reflection. The open-ended nature of the learning history document would contrast with the case study, which would tend to present a coherent, whole and externally-heard story. The timing restrictions were noted but I felt that a way to avoid this would be to produce the learning history and conduct the workshops before writing the case study.

To begin with, I sought to set up meetings with members from each organisation separately in order to discuss expectations and perspectives of the research and plan more precisely how things could work out. My approach to Roger Hammond in this light was well received and together with two other colleagues, who had been working on Nigeria programmes, we discussed Living Earth’s objectives for the learning history and how they could be met. It seemed that there was a degree of internal intention towards the project and a number of the key participants seemed ready to act as champions for the reflective practice. I tried to do the same with Shell, but Michael Megarry was unable to schedule time for a discussion about research plans.

During September 1999 I familiarised myself with the political, economic and ethnic/cultural history in Nigeria as well as Shell’s experience with corporate responsibility and NGO engagement. I made initial but limited contact with Living Earth Nigeria. I then, attempted to arrange time to spend with individuals within Shell and Living Earth; from the initial list of individuals at Shell and Living Earth, who had been involved in the relationship, I decided initially to concentrate upon the important and readily available contacts, from whom I hoped

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<sup>1</sup> As is often the case with such post event research, some of the participants had left the organisations or in Shell’s case

to get an understanding of the relationship. Having achieved this I would then go back to the key participants as well as other parties to conduct further reflective interviews.

It became clear that I only had limited experience in interview practice and so before I began the reflective interviews, I set up a “trial” interview with a colleague who was not involved in the relationship. My sense was that I was seeking to find out about both the tangible activities and the thinking of participants in order to tell the story of the collaboration for the case write up. I would also need to engage in more open-ended discussion to explore the deeper thinking and feeling of the participants that would inform the learning history. It seemed to require both of the types of qualitative interview - cultural and topical - that Rubin and Rubin forward (1995). Up until that trial, I had been trying to develop a traditional “interview protocol”. However, after conducting this trial I reflected upon the place of the participant and a felt need to allow for an emergent, open space between myself and the participant that would resemble the notion of conversational partners (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Accordingly, I developed an “interview picture” (see appendix F) that, instead of forcing me to focus the interview upon specific sequence of questions, would allow for an exploration according to the pattern of interaction between myself and each participant. The picture was based upon themes that had emerged from early conversations, about practice in NGO-business relationships generally and the Living Earth-Shell relationship in particular as well as the issues of interest to me for my PhD.

By the beginning of October I had managed to conduct initial sessions with members from Living Earth UK. Prior to each interview I made contact with the participant to discuss arrangements and expectations; I also tried to send a copy of the interview picture to each participant beforehand, suggesting that they might like to consider the map and other issues they may wish to inquire into during the session. The early conversations I had at Living Earth UK were quite lengthy (an average of about two hours). I was, therefore, able to develop an initial sense of the “story” of the collaboration from Living Earth’s perspective as well as engaging reflectively with the participants about how they and the organisation had been affected. I also had interesting and reflective conversational interviews with individuals at other NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and African Initiatives about the relationship between Shell and Living Earth. Despite the fact that I had still not met with Michael Megarry again since the first meeting in August, I had decided to go ahead and establish contact with other individuals at Shell International. I was then able to conduct three interviews with Shell staff.

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moved to alternative locations (Australia, America, the Netherlands).

link to: [http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc\\_theses\\_links/r\\_shah.html](http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/r_shah.html)

At this time I was also arranging my trip to Nigeria, where I was planning to talk to participants at Shell Nigeria, Living Earth Nigeria and other NGOs. In organising this trip, I had been in contact (primarily by e-mail) with the director of Living Earth Nigeria with regard to some of the practical arrangements of my stay as well as trying to engage about the nature of my visit. Despite repeated attempts, I was not able to establish direct contact with individuals from Shell Nigeria before my departure.

This low level of contact with individuals in Nigeria was a significant stumbling block in the inquiry; these experiences have informed my understanding of the issues of participation and relationship and I draw upon them in later sections; in this chapter, I am looking to tell the story of what I did in my research without wandering down too many political diversions on this distinctly political section of the journey.<sup>2</sup>

### 5.3 Nigeria visit and personal writing

My three weeks in Nigeria were spent between Lagos, Port Harcourt (the oil producing “capital” city) and the Niger Delta (the region where most of the oil extracted in Nigeria comes from and in whose villages Living Earth’s and many of Shell’s community development programmes are located). Initially, in Lagos I sought to establish contact with two potential sponsors (Basil Omiyi, Director of External Relations Shell Nigeria, and Precious Omoku, Community Relations External Affairs Manager) to discuss how the work could be taken forward in Nigeria; since I had not had prior contact with any staff from Shell Nigeria, it was a time consuming and ultimately unmanageable task<sup>3</sup>. They could only meet me in ten days time and so I decided that I would be wasting time in Lagos waiting to speak to a couple of individuals while I still had to go to Port Harcourt and the Delta.

Upon arrival in Port Harcourt I was picked up from the airport by the Dara Akala, the Director of Living Earth Nigeria. I stayed at Living Earth residences, housed at the back of their office area, and as a result I was able to spend a considerable amount of time getting to know the individual staff of the organisation on an informal basis. I spent the first few days trying to

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware that some of this section may sound negative and looking to apportion blame. I found the challenges of working in Nigeria immense; they were exacerbated by numerous factors - some of which I was unaware of at the time - concerning internal relations between Shell International and Shell Nigeria and others concerning my own practice as a researcher. Whilst I tended to blame individuals and myself for the way things transpired it now seems that the “others” and my on-going inquiry into my practice have provided the vital experiences of what participation means for the individual seeking change.

<sup>3</sup> Shell Nigeria has its central headquarters in Lagos, whilst its operational headquarters, a huge complex of offices, are



establish contact with individuals at Shell Nigeria at their Port Harcourt offices - this was where the community development staff were located. Hubert Nwokolo, General Manager of Community Development, whom I had briefly met in London, was my first contact with Shell in Nigeria; unfortunately I was only able to spend 15 minutes with him during which time we discussed how I should contact the other members of Shell Nigeria to whom I needed to speak. I spent the next week trying to establish contact with these individuals and arrange to spend time with them. In total, at Shell Nigeria in Port Harcourt, I had one-hour long session with the NGO Liaison Officer, Ngozi Amah, and two half-hour sessions with individuals who had early contact with Living Earth but were no longer involved the relationship.

Whilst in Port Harcourt, I also had the opportunity to meet a number staff from local NGOs and was able to attend a conference on the "Peoples of the Niger Delta and the Constitution" organised by a local NGO, Environmental Rights Action. I also spent a considerable amount of time with the director of Living Earth Nigeria. From Port Harcourt I accompanied some Living Earth staff to Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa state and entrance into the wetlands of the Delta; at Yenagoa we took a boat into the central areas of the Delta from where I was able to visit the Biseni cluster of villages - Emakalakala, Akeplai and Opume. I spent four days in the Delta and attended meetings with elders and chiefs at each of these three villages, spoke to various youth groups and saw a number of the development initiatives and programmes set up by Living Earth.

When I returned to Lagos I met with the Director of External Relations, Basil Omiyi, as well as a former community development officer with Shell Nigeria, who was a central figure in the early relationship with Living Earth in Nigeria.

The experience of visiting Nigeria and speaking to various activists, local community individuals and seeing first hand the stunning quality of the Delta ecology was an intense period of engagement. On a number of occasions I was deeply disturbed and confronted my own personal position in the on-going perpetuation of environmental and social conflict and dehumanisation.<sup>4</sup> In feeling this personal responsibility I came to notice some of the deeper

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located in Port Harcourt and Warri.

<sup>4</sup> I had been offered the opportunity of working under Shell protection in Nigeria, but decided against this - I was told that under their wing I would only be able to travel at certain times and on certain roads in Lagos. Instead I had been in contact with Muyiwa Odele, a member of local NGO in Lagos, who helped me settle in, take me around and help with establishing contact. It may have been strategically better to work under Shell's wing for I may have been more easily accommodated within their system and therefore may have had better contact with individuals within. However, if I had done this I would not have had the opportunity to go out to the central areas of the Delta since a security restriction upon travel to communities was applied to all Shell staff, including community development officers; my experience in the Delta was genuinely affective and I think it is perhaps something which I would not trade for a couple more interviews in

relations between my own interactions and the situation in Nigeria. In particular my reflective personal writing began to take on a different quality and depth. It was from this time that my own practice, as a powerful individual seeking change, took on a more figural aspect in my inquiry.

I began writing my personal reflections in July 1998, following advice from Peter Reason and Judi Marshall at Bath that it would be a useful and valuable way of tracking my own experience and learning during the research and could prove to be a cathartic outlet during my practice. Initially, I had perhaps regarded it quite marginally and instrumentally, using it to move my thinking forward about certain issues or ideas. As I entered the context of the Shell-Living Earth relationship it was a place to note my impressions and understanding of the relationship and to notice my relations with the participants. During my visit to Nigeria these reflections became considerably more personal and significant to me; the notes allowed me to release the intense emotionality of feeling that a number of encounters engendered. Increasingly, I inquired into my practice in the research and drew this into the context of the Shell-Living Earth relationship and sustainability; as I came to attach significance to the way that my inquiry mirrored the inquiry “out there,” the notes became a place for reflecting upon my own relational practice.

#### **5.4 Case write-up and development of learning history documents**

Although I had not spoken to all of the people who had been involved in the relationship when I returned to the UK, I proceeded to prepare the case study for INTRAC, since the deadline for their publication was impending. In mid-December I submitted a first draft but soon it was made clear that the deadline would be extended to mid-January. Following requests from Living Earth and Shell to see a copy of the case study, I sent these out to all participants in my research requesting feedback and comment. During the extra time in January I was able to speak to some of the other participants, such as former staff of Living Earth, the rest of the Living Earth team and Michael Megarry. A list of participants in the research is in appendix B.

I was permitted to tape all my interviews in the UK. Whilst my formal interviews at Living Earth Nigeria and other NGOs were also taped, this was not an acceptable practice at Shell Nigeria and I, therefore, took notes during those interviews. Whilst in the Delta I did not tape

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Lagos.

any conversations, but wrote notes where possible. As often as I could, I would transcribe the interviews immediately after each session. When I transcribed these various data “recordings”, I made my own comments along the side of the text; these comments consisted of thoughts and feelings that had been evoked at the time, subsequent reflections upon the interview and links to comments or observations made elsewhere.

At the beginning of 1999, with the case study more or less complete, I sought to return to a grounded analysis of the data in order to produce the learning history documentation. I felt it would be necessary to produce a separate learning history for each of the four organisations with whom I was working. I asked staff at Living Earth and Shell via e-mail whether they would like to contribute to producing the document. Since it was felt that time had already been devoted to revising the case study and looking over interview transcripts, participants at both Shell and Living Earth UK said they would not have the time to develop the learning history with me but would read and prepare for a reflective workshop if I produced the documents myself.

#### **5.4.1 Development of grounded theory**

In order to produce the learning history documents I returned to the transcribed and annotated interview text for the development of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using the underlying ideas behind open and axial coding as defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990), I began my analysis by picking one of the transcripts at random and reading through the text. As I did so I wrote “labels” alongside various sections of text - line, paragraph, section or page. These labels were more or less single words or phrases that came to mind as meaningful heuristics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) when I read through the text. Rather than being a deeply cognitive process, these labels and their assignment to sections of the text “came to mind” as instantaneous projections and images in response to reading the text. In retrospect it was the kind of intensely personal sense making process of discovery that Judi Marshall has described (1981).

As I went through I made a list of the “labels”; initially, I found that there was a surge in the alternative labels that I was able to identify. Some of these labels tended to reappear frequently and others less so as I came across more text that seemed to relate to the particular label. In developing these labels I found that the same section of text would sometimes evoke more than one label. As I was doing this coding exercise and as more examples of a single label appeared, my sense of what each label signified to me became more refined. After I coded

more than half of the transcripts and no longer seemed to be discovering new codes I took a break from the exercise for a couple of days. When I came back to code the remainder of interviews I found that there was another initial surge in labels that I was picking up. Whilst I had retrospectively tried to add newly discovered labels to the previously coded transcripts, this was an incomplete covering up of gaps and so after I completed the remainder of the transcripts I returned to early set of interviews that I had coded in order to reapply the new codes. As this suggests, whilst the early stage in the process of identification of codes and assignment to pieces of text was in a sense quite tacit (particularly for the first time a new code was “discovered”), I was far more cognitively proactive in the later stages of the process because I had become more aware of the codes and they were more sharply texture-ised.

When I finished the open coding and labelling (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) I was left with 94 codes (listed in appendix C). In order to understand how they could be used for the learning history I first looked through codes and grouped them into distinct “types” in a number of different ways or categories. My first attempt at this categorisation resulted in the following:

- activities/specific event/stages of relationship;
- actions;
- concepts;
- self;
- inter-relation/relating;
- interpretations;
- flow/approach and
- emotion/cognitive state.

I then reconsidered the codes across a different set of divisions:

- behavioural aspects of the story;
- cognitive/perceptual aspects of the story;
- theory of relationship/organisation.

Although none of the categorisations were in any way comprehensive or self-contained, this “nudging and poking” allowed me to perceive the different properties and dimensions of the individual codes. I considered whether presenting them according to either of these categorisations would be useful for the learning history documents and reflection in the

workshops. However, neither of them appeared to bring out any feeling of “rightness” or fit and so I reconsidered my strategy.

In undertaking this categorisation process I had been questioning each of the themes comparing, contrasting and “holding them up to the light” to see what they looked like. Whilst I held a rough image or pattern in my mind of the meaning of each code they were neither equally clear nor consistent. I felt that I needed more precise definitions for the codes. I went through the interviews transcripts again and created a new set of documents; for each code I gathered together all of the relevant sections of text from the interviews and collated them into separate documents.

This “chunking” into 94 documents, similar to the index card exercise described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) allowed me to consider each code in more detailed focus; in doing so I refined and made more explicit my understanding of the codes. Some codes no longer seemed appropriate - either being subsumed into another code or seeming to be identical to another. I decided not to discard any codes but to note the conflicts, contradictions, similarities etc. that were being brought out. With separate documents for each code I then read through each one and began to build up a detailed picture of the code. I did this by drawing a set of associated cognitive maps, in which I noted specific attributes, properties and dimensions, drew links to other codes and identified specific actions, behaviours or activities from the relationship that I associated with the code. I used a number of approaches and questioning techniques to build my sense of the lie of each code and enhance “theoretical sensitivity” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I was continually shifting between levels of attention - moving from honing in on the specific detail of the interview “chunks” to panning out to look at the code in broader relief of the process and content of the relationship and sustainability. In doing so I began to build a sense of depth and colour to the codes.

It became clear that, if I was to present the learning history document based upon the coding process in such a way as would encourage discussion, it would be important to retain a manageable number of core pillars around which attention could be focused. As I was proceeding with this chunking and sensitising exercise, I noticed that some of the codes seemed to hold more information, inter-connections and depth than others. The process of drawing maps for each of the 94 would be lengthy and ultimately impractical for use with participants. Therefore, instead of drawing maps for all of the 94 codes I took a broader look at the 94 codes again to see if I could discern “central” or “core” codes around which others clustered. It became clear that ten of the codes I had identified could be better considered

“meta-codes” or “themes”, which seemed to stand out as more significant<sup>5</sup>. This was both a quantitative and qualitative “significance test”, in the sense that I considered the amount of meaning that each code seemed to hold for me, alongside the quantity of raw data as sections of interview text that each one consisted of. I have included one of these cognitive maps in appendix G, it gives an indication of the relational and tacit forms of knowing that I drew upon in developing my understanding of the codes.

## 5.5 Writing and reflecting upon the learning history

I then proceeded to put Living Earth UK’s learning history document together, using the ten themes that had emerged from the data analysis. I took the map that I had drawn for each theme and the relevant document with chunked interview text and tried to form a self-contained “story” in the two column format of a learning history. On the right hand column of the document I pasted quotes and on the left I made comments, questions or remarks that elaborated upon the quotations. To help build each themed-section I paid attention alternately to telling an “interesting story”, trying to give critical reflection from my perspective and providing an account of what took place in the relationship (although I was aware that much of this last had been covered in the case study). Occasionally, I found it necessary to break the two column format with some full page text in order to punctuate the reading of the theme. In a sense it was a “plating” exercise, which gradually drew the strands together. The exercise was very much iterative, going through several drafts and redrafts as I sought to craft an intelligible and meaningful communication, which evoked the tacit impression of each code that I held in my mind.

As I built up the document in this way two things came to my attention: first, I was aware that the learning history document would be a very long if I went through each of the 10 themes in their entirety and second that, while I was aiming to present the learning history for the participants, there seemed to be some degree to which the themes, although equally important, may be more significant from my perspective as a PhD researcher than of practitioner interest.

I reflected upon my intentions and motivation for using the learning history method and what I had thought it would offer. I recalled that in discussion with Living Earth UK they seemed to agree with my impression that the method would be a good way to get active engagement and reflection through an accessible written document. I realised that if I presented an overly

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<sup>5</sup> The themes I identified were "knowing and knowing the score", "choosing communities", "helping others",

lengthy and dense document one of the main objectives of the inquiry would be obscured. Subsequently, I tried to simplify each theme and present it in less depth. However, I found that doing so meant that the richness of voice, perspective and tone was diminished. I then referred back to the cognitive maps and thought about the overall story I would be presenting. It seemed that of the ten themes, three - “control”, “independence”, “upper-lower/donor-victim/outside-local” - were very closely linked to issues of “helping the other” and “participation”. Rather than duplicate some aspects and dimensions of the story and so create a lengthier document or sacrifice some depth for each theme to keep the document shorter, I decided to integrate those three themes within the remainder. I have no recollection nor notes of why I also chose to discard the “knowing and knowing the score” theme<sup>6</sup>. Through this process I built Living Earth UK’s learning history around the six themes of choosing communities, helping others, participation, change, emergence and abundance.

With the learning history documents nearing completion, I considered the format of the workshops with Living Earth UK. In discussion with Peter we decided that it would be important to have two facilitators for the session, since up to 14 people were likely to attend; Peter’s experience in group situations, which I lacked, would be important to harness the flow of the conversation in the workshop. At the beginning of March 2000 I sent out learning history document to all of the staff (programme officers as well as administrative staff) at Living Earth UK, with a note explaining the background to the inquiry and requesting that they read through the document and try to notice their reactions as they did so. I suggested they might like to address questions such as “what is of interest?”, “what excites or upsets?” and to make notes in the margins of the document. All Living Earth UK staff were invited to attend the planned workshop and on March 21<sup>st</sup> Peter and I facilitated a workshop with 7 members from Living Earth UK (just under half of the staff), including both directors and the Nigeria programme manager.

During the workshop we worked with the format of the document and asked the participants to briefly scan over the first section on “selection of communities”. After they had time to refresh their impressions of the section we asked individual participants to mention specific aspects that they had found interesting or had reflected upon and what they had felt when

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"participation", "change", "emergence", "control", "independence", "upper-lower/donor-victim/outside-local".

<sup>6</sup> As I looked back at my notes there was nothing that indicated why I had chosen to move to 6 from 10 themes. When I started writing to explain this my first reaction was to try and recollect whether my decision was based entirely upon some specific factor that had come from the data etc; in fact the decision was perhaps more pragmatic than I initially was comfortable to admit. But as I notice this desire to “explain” I am also confronted with some questions about my power

reading this. Others were invited to contribute and in this way we built up a conversation about the theme from the perspective of participants. We went through each of the six sections in turn asking the same of the participants and generally “keeping the conversation going” by not dwelling on one particular aspect for too long. During this time I made a note on a flipchart of the issues, themes and ideas that were emerging in conversation. After going through each of the sections we placed the charts from each of the six themes on the wall. We asked participants to identify one or two points that they regarded were key or central aspects of learning for Living Earth, Shell and the relationship and which they would like to take back into their work. We reconvened the group and asked participants to discuss their selection of important topics. We built up a number of core issues that the participants had felt Living Earth could take from the experience with Shell as evoked through the learning history.

At the end of the workshop a number of the participants voiced concern about the importance of applying the points that had been flagged during the conversation into the everyday working life of the organisation. It was suggested that I should collate the main points of the discussion in written form. So, after the workshop, I transcribed the session and drew up a learning document, which highlighted the key ideas that were identified. I sent both of these documents to all staff at Living Earth UK and asked whether they reflected their experience of the workshop. In order to enable the outputs to be fed back into the working life of Living Earth, I also offered to spend time with each individual to discuss ideas and strategies that they might act upon.

By this stage I had received responses from Living Earth Nigeria, Shell Nigeria and Shell International to my inquiries about how they might like to take the learning history forward. Judging the responses, the amount of time required to produce a learning history and the needs of the organisations I decided to produce two more learning histories - one for Living Earth Nigeria and another for Shell. My first move was to return to the 94 codes and the “chunked” data from which I had developed the core themes for Living Earth UK’s learning history; I attempted to look at the codes anew and develop the learning histories, first for Living Earth Nigeria and then for Shell, from the “ground up”. I struggled with this for a number of days, finding it difficult to shift my attention beyond the core themes that I had used for the Living Earth UK document. As I subsequently noted in my reflections, “I then came to the realisation, or perhaps the justification, that you can’t step in the same river twice...that’s to say

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as an author writing this document.

link to: [http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc\\_theses\\_links/r\\_shah.html](http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/r_shah.html)



that I had already done the analysis and chunking and regrouping around themes and what I was trying to do was to regain my stance prior to the regrouping that I did for Living Earth UK. In a sense trying to regain my naivety” (Personal notes 6<sup>th</sup> April 2000, Bath). The six themes seemed to be as significant as before and so I decided to maintain them as the core structure around which to organise the documents for Living Earth Nigeria and Shell. With these same themes, I changed the content - both quotes and comments - of the documents in order to reflect what I perceived to be the needs/intentions for the different organisations.

I sent learning histories to Shell Nigeria and Living Earth Nigeria. I sought to talk to staff at Shell Nigeria and Living Earth Nigeria to gauge their impressions of the documents and whether they felt they could be useful. I made a decision not to return to Nigeria in order to facilitate workshops with either organisation but described the positive workshop that had taken place within Living Earth UK as an example that the Nigerian organisations might like to follow. Following negotiation in Shell International, where I sent e-mails to original participants requesting their participation in a workshop, I was given the opportunity for a discussion involving three members of staff; unfortunately this and another scheduled session were cancelled. A third session, attended by two participants, including Michael Megarry, did not proceed satisfactorily and eventually I was told that the workshop with Shell International would be indefinitely postponed.

Roth and Kleiner (1995) suggest that following internal workshops, where the organisations get a chance to ask what can be learnt from the collaboration and how the organisation can move forward, it is useful to allow others in the organisation, who are attempting similar collaborative efforts, to be included in such learning through further workshops<sup>7</sup>. Given the commitment of both Shell and Living Earth to engagement beyond this particular relationship, their network of within-sector relationships and the general growth of collaboration between businesses and NGOs, I felt that it would be useful to widen participation and reading of the Shell-Living Earth learning history. I proposed this to Living Earth and Shell; initially Michael Megarry at Shell International agreed, while Roger Hammond at Living Earth UK expressed reservations about allowing the content of the learning history to be made available externally. I pursued the idea of the external workshop for sometime but eventually I decided that it would be best to divert my energy towards other forms of third-person research/practice and sense making.

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<sup>7</sup> Like other qualitative methods where sending and receiving contexts do not have to be the same in order to engender learning, the learning history document is written with the intention of engaging a wider audience; the two column format is constructed in such a way as to give a thick description of the experience of the original group that allows an open and engaging reading of the document such that others can work from their own experiences more readily than from, say, a traditional case write-up.

## 5.6 Beginning to make sense of this all

In July 2000 I attended the 4<sup>th</sup> conference of International Society for Third-Sector Research at Trinity College in Dublin. At the conference I was a member on a panel session focusing on NGO-Private Sector relationships and was able to present my research with Shell and Living Earth. The five-day conference was valuable for the contact I made with other researchers at a time when I was beginning to think about “the story” of my work; as well as presenting my work, I was able to discuss ideas and thoughts with other NGO researchers working with business relationships and action research.

During the course of the research I had also been a member of an NGO-business relationships e-mail discussion group<sup>8</sup>; as I sought to make sense of my experiences I found the group to be a useful location for exploring, clarifying and expounding my thinking with others. I had a number of interesting and provocative discussions over e-mail which helped my thinking considerably.<sup>9</sup>

In September 2000 I attended the 8<sup>th</sup> Emerging Approaches to Inquiry Conference in Stroud, England. This conference came at a time when I was intensely involved in writing-up my thesis. During the four days of the conference. I was able to spend a great deal of time in small groups talking freely about and working upon my research/practice.

One particular aspect in this whole process, to which it is difficult to assign one particular slot in the timeline, regards my own practice in my research. As I suggested above, over time my personal notes have taken on increasing significance for me. During the early stages of my encounter with Shell and Living Earth I did not think that I would present my own practice as part of the findings of my work, but felt that it would be a useful appendage to inform the understandings of other participatory relationships. Steadily, I came to notice that my own attempts at participatory research and my reflections upon this informed the analysis of the Shell-Living Earth experience. As I analysed my formal “data”, as well as the process of my

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<sup>8</sup> I am very grateful to my colleague and friend Jem Bendell for the energy and work he has put into setting this up. His enthusiasm and excitement has provided me with a great deal of inspiration and charging of my own energies.

<sup>9</sup> Although I cannot specify the exact value of these interactions they were important for developing my sense making activities; they also provided a valuable forum in which to “test out” some of my thinking. One particular example may be useful: following the monthly newsletter sent out by the group organiser, Jem Bendell, in which there was a piece about the United Nations Global Compact with business I sent an e-mail asking some questions about the implications of such an organisation working with business. As it turned out, although I was not aware of it at the time, John Ruggie – assistant to the Secretary General – was a member of the group. He replied to my original positing and we had an exchange of e-mails about some of the issues and questions that I had raised.

inquiry, I increasingly came to notice how my own experiences played a central part in the conclusions that I was able to draw. Thus, whilst I had initially (half-heartedly) conceived of the idea of writing a personal learning history as a way to present what I had done in my research – separate from my core “findings” – in the process of sense making I have found that my own learning could and should take a more definite position. Like much else in this work, the inquiry into my own experience has been an element of the design of the methodology, part of the findings of the research, has given a hint of the analysis and conclusions and, in the process, has reflexively informed the emergent pattern of the methodology itself. The personal learning history, chapter 8, then has also been a process through which I have distilled my own experiences, a space through which to analyse them and a location to present my findings.

Having established the context to the inquiry in terms of sustainability, change and power and described the relational practices in chapter 2 - 4 and having outlined the flow of inquiry in this chapter, I now move onto to section IV where I explore the empirical tracks of my inquiry based upon the research I conducted with Living Earth and Shell.

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